Instructional Leadership Practices: Teachers Perceptions of a Rural School Principal in Fiji

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which teachers perceive their principal to be effectively exhibiting an instructional leadership role. Data for the study were collected from teachers (N=24) in a rural secondary school in Fiji using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) developed and advocated by Hallinger (1990). In addition to Likert scale items, the questionnaire included open-ended questions to gain deeper insights into teachers' ratings of each item. Analyses of the data revealed that ratings for the principal were the highest for communicating school goals to students and protecting instructional time while supervision and evaluation of instruction were the lowest-rated items. The lack of professional preparation for an instructional leadership role and the dual role of the rural principal as school leader and teacher, which appears to compromise both roles, may together explain the scant attention paid to the instructional leadership role. These findings have implications for principals' workload and in turn instructional leadership practices, which the Fiji Ministry of Education could re-visit to avoid compromising either the leadership or teaching role.

Key Terms: instructional leadership, rural education, Fiji, leadership role, student achievement, dual role

Introduction

In recent years, school leaders have been pressured to improve schools to achieve better learning outcomes for their students. To this end, the catalyst is the quality of principal's instructional leadership role in schools, which is crucial for any significant difference in shaping teachers' instructional practices and children's academic success (Bush, 2011; Hayes & Irby, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). As such, principals need relevant skills and knowledge for their role in instructional leadership, without which school success cannot be guaranteed. High-performing principals especially in the area of instruction are the key players in improving student performance. With numerous educational reforms occurring in many jurisdictions, including Fiji, principals need ongoing capacity-building and guidance to further

improve their instructional leadership practices in order to maximise children's learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2006; Lingam & Lingam, 2014; Lingam et al., 2017). It is crucial for school principals to be well equipped with 21st century leadership skills and knowledge in order to keep pace with the ever-changing work demands; otherwise educational organisations will fall far short of achieving their vision and mission (Cardno & House, 2005; Hayes &02 Irby, 20). The importance of professional preparatory training and development for principals is emphasised in the literature as a way to equip them for their role in instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006). School leaders need to be better prepared because they have a strong influence on what happens in the school and in classrooms.

In view of the ever-changing educational environment and the unfolding reformative responses in various contexts in education, this preliminary study explores teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of the instructional leadership role of a rural school principal in Fiji, a small island developing state in the Pacific region.

Leads from the Literature

In recent times, the key role of principals has changed from manager to instructional leader. As a result, the principals are expected to focus more on school improvement and students' academic success (Louis et al., 2010; Marzano et al., 2005; O'Donnell & White, 2005). Instructional leadership has therefore become a preferred term because of the "recognition that principals who operate from this frame of reference rely more on expertise and influence than on formal authority and power to achieve a positive and lasting impact on staff motivation and behavior and student learning" (Hallinger, 2010, pp. 275–276). In the context of the increasing emphasis on the instructional leadership role in education, principals are supposed to work towards improving academic achievement of students and face negative consequences if the results are poor (Rousmaniere, 2013). There is a need for principals to keep a balance between their role expectations and successful running of their schools in order to be responsive to their stakeholders especially children and parents (Fullan, 2007).

Literature demonstrates that school heads are the key people responsible for improving academic performance of students (Bellibas & Liu, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). In this regard, better-qualified principals are required because they can come up with constructive school improvement initiatives to provide high-quality learning experiences to all students. However, in rural settings it may be a challenge to recruit and retain not only well-qualified teachers but also well-qualified principals (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Monk, 2007) and this is detrimental to student academic achievement (Louis et al., 2010; Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011). At the school level, principals influence almost all variables associated with learning and teaching and their instructional leadership practices have a strong influence on student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008).

For instance, if the principals carry out effective supervision of instruction, then they will be able to diagnose teachers' weaknesses and strengths and can plan for some remedial programmes to improve their performance. Without active engagement of the principal in supporting teachers' classroom work, student achievement is unlikely to improve. For this engagement to occur, schools need qualified and inner-directed principals, especially those with high-quality instructional leadership practices. However, in many contexts principals have reported that they lacked preparation for their leadership role, including their instructional role

(Duncan et al., 2011; Hayes & Irby, 2020; Lingam & Lingam, 2014). This may adversely impact their instructional capacity and in turn lower student learning outcomes (Marzano et al., 2005; O'Donnell & White, 2005).

Because we were inspired by Hallinger's (1990) model of effective instructional leadership practices, the sections that follow offer further insight by elaborating on the pertinent details of the model. The major categories of instructional leadership model are: defining the school mission; developing a positive school learning climate; and managing the instructional programme. Hallinger's model was chosen for this study because it is relevant to the schooling context in Fiji and has been widely used elsewhere. The model uses *Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale* (PIMRS) instrument which consists of specific job-related functions that relate closely to principal's leadership roles of leading and managing learning and teaching in Fiji schools. The major categories of the model are discussed in what follows.

Defining the School Mission

Defining the school mission involves the subscales of framing school goals and communicating school goals. Goal setting is important to enable everyone to work towards a shared goal. According to Hallinger (2010), setting high educational goals can lead to improved academic performance. The goals should be clear, specific, measurable and attainable. Also emphasised is the need for school leaders to work closely together with relevant stakeholders such as teachers, parents and students to frame school goals. In high-performing schools, principals usually discuss and develop the school vision and goals with their staff (Kaparou & Bush, 2015). Having a shared vision and goals not only motivates teachers to create environments conducive to student learning but also to align their own professional learning and growth plan with the school's mission.

Apart from framing the school goals, the school leaders need to effectively disseminate the goals to all interested partners in the school community. In Malaysia, for example, principals are expected to engage all stakeholders in developing not only the school goals and mission but also values that the school intends to promote and uphold (Rahimah & Ghavifekr, 2014). The literature clearly indicates the extended role and responsibilities of principals apply not only in Malaysia but also in other countries throughout the world (Cardno & Howse, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Lingam et al., 2014; Lingam et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2008; Tie, 2012; Timperley, 2006).

Developing a Positive School Learning Climate

This dimension includes five subscales: protecting instructional time, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives to teachers, promoting professional development, and promoting incentives for learning. Overall, this dimension is associated with creating an "academic press" (Hallinger, 2009, p. 10). The school head is responsible for establishing "standards" and expectations that are closely aligned with the school mission, fostering a pleasant learning and teaching space, enhancing student achievement, promoting teacher development, and collaborating to achieve success together (Hallinger et al., 2013, p. 276). Overall, the principals can contribute towards building professional capacity of their teachers and create a pleasant

organisational climate for effective learning and teaching and also demonstrate best pedagogical practices to their teachers (Leithwood et al., 2004). Principals need to support teachers such as by providing constructive feedback and encouraging critical reflection. These actions will help create a sustainable environment for student learning and a sustainable culture of academic success.

Managing the Instructional Programme

The key feature of this dimension is that school heads continuously supervise and monitor the implementation of the instructional programme and provide constructive feedback to teachers for continuous instructional improvement. The three subscales relating to this dimension of work are: supervising and evaluating the curriculum, coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress. One study carried out in Malaysia showed that the management and administrative work of the principals has intensified, leaving them with little time to focus on the overall quality of teaching and learning (Jones et al., 2015). Another Malaysian study found that principals delegated curriculum supervision tasks to senior teachers because of their busy work schedule (Tie, 2012). Managing the instructional programme is an important dimension of work for principals which should not be neglected.

The literature therefore clearly articulates that principals are instrumental in influencing student learning by shaping best practices in all facets of learning and teaching. As such, all school principals need to demonstrate best practices in their instructional leadership role as outlined by Hallinger (2010). In doing so, they could contribute significantly towards improving student learning outcomes. This potential benefit underlines the need to give adequate attention to improving school leaders' knowledge and skills in all aspects of instructional leadership practices to better prepare them for this role. Only then will educational practitioners – both school leaders and teachers – be in a better position to positively impact the learning and teaching process for the benefit of children's education.

Significance of the Study

This study is one of the few empirical studies that has investigated rural school principals' instructional leadership practices in the context of the rapidly changing education landscape in Fiji. Due to various reforms introduced in education, principals need to enhance their knowledge and skills that can lead to ongoing improvement of their schools (Earley & Greany, 2017; Fullan, 2009). Without effective leadership at the school level, most of these reforms are likely to fail and in turn adversely impact students' learning outcomes. In this light, the present study on instructional leadership is timely as it helps to determine the status of instructional leadership in one of the rural secondary schools in Fiji. Its findings could contribute to sound decision-making about introducing effective interventions. For example, continuous professional development programmes for principals (OECD, 2016) could be delivered through a variety of forms and spaces such as workshops and seminars to help improve and contextualise leadership practices in relation to modernising education and in the quest for high-quality education, especially in rural settings (Lingam & Lingam, 2014; Zepeda et al., 2017).

Professional development could specifically focus on instructional leadership role to lift student outcomes.

Because no empirical research has been carried out in the Pacific region specifically using Hallinger's instructional leadership framework, this study is a starting point; the schools in Fiji have been the first for exploration. Also, given the paucity of studies of instructional leadership in developing contexts such as in small island developing states (Bolanle, 2013; Timirizi, 2002), the findings of the current study may act as a catalyst for more local and international research on leadership issues. Such research might explore other educational issues in the Pacific in addition to instructional leadership, in view of the limited literature on a range of aspects of education (Lingam & Lingam, 2016; Sanga, 2012). As well as providing valuable insights into current practices and issues in the Pacific region, the findings can help inform educational policies and practices to address certain gaps in educational leadership development, with a view to strengthening instructional leadership practices at the school level.

Study Context

Schools in Fiji were established through the Christian missions, especially from 1874 when the British colonial era began, and then through various socio-religious organisations with the result that most villages had a school by 1900. The majority of the secondary schools today are owned by socio-religious organisations and local communities. All schools receive government financial assistance and follow the Ministry of Education's policies and curricula. The school management board is responsible for the maintenance and development of school facilities using the government grants (Lingam, 2009). The multiplicity of ownership structures contributes to major differences in the standard of school facilities and resources throughout the country. Likewise, the marked differences in schools and settings are exacerbated because school heads are often expected to carry out a variety of roles, including teaching, in addition to leading and managing the school (Cardno & Howse, 2005). This challenging dual role can lead to compromises in the roles and responsibilities of both positions.

The Ministry is responsible for the administration and management of education policy and the delivery of educational services. It provides the curriculum frameworks, policy guidelines and directions, and qualified teaching personnel. Also, more recently, it has started providing some of the prescribed textbooks that support all schools in their delivery of education for students. This centralisation is seen as some measure of quality control over the education provided. Another Ministry initiative has been to provide bus fares for all students. Administratively, the Ministry operates through four Education Divisions, each managed by a Divisional Education Officer, and nine Education Districts, each managed by a District Senior Education Officer.

The distribution of schools has profound implications for the provision of high-quality education in Fiji. The geography of the country constrains the accessibility of schools for many students, in that many rural areas are isolated by their location either as remote islands or in the rugged terrain of the larger islands. The widespread distribution of the population also increases transportation and communication difficulties and costs, adding to the problems the Ministry faces in providing supervision and in administering and evaluating services to schools, especially those in remote locations. Because such problems limit the extent to which Ministry personnel can provide professional help, the Ministry depends on school leaders for professional support.

Adding to these difficulties, in 2009 the government decided to suddenly lower the retirement age, forcing many long-term school leaders to exit the profession permanently; the resulting drop in the number of experienced principals called for, and still calls for, the preparation of those who were abruptly promoted to school leadership positions (Lingam, 2012).

An implication of these developments is that Fiji now needs competent, professional school leaders who can provide a high quality of service to the school community, regardless of their location. To meet this expectation, the Ministry could place more emphasis on leadership and management training. This would help school leaders to become more proficient in their leadership and management roles so that schools are more effective and achieve better learning outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The study reported here was undertaken to explore leadership practices, focusing specifically on the extent to which a rural school principal demonstrated the instructional leadership practices as advocated in Hallinger's (1990) model. As a preliminary investigation, this study is guided by one key research question: *What are the teachers' perceptions of instructional leadership practices of their school principal?*

Methodology

This study aimed to determine the extent to which a rural school principal demonstrated effective job functions inherent in the instructional leadership role. The study utilised a survey instrument consisting of closed and open-ended questions to collect the data needed for the study. To achieve this mix of questions, the survey instrument developed by Hallinger (1990) known as the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) was adapted to include an open-ended question at the end of each subscale.

This instrument was chosen because it is widely accepted and has been used in many studies in various contexts. According to Hallinger et al. (2018) "The PIMRS framework and instrument have been used in 500+ studies of principal instructional leadership conducted in more than 35 countries" (p. 106). Findings from meta-analyses of the PIMRS indicate that it meets high standards of reliability and validity (Hallinger et al., 2013). Thus, it is a reliable and valid instrument for data collection on the instructional leadership role and performance (Hallinger, 2011; Hallinger & Wang, 2015). However, numerous researchers, scholars and practitioners have highlighted that a school's cultural context may shape the leadership practices of its principal (Belchetz & Leithwood, 2007; Hallinger 2011, 2018) and as such the generic set of leadership practices must be adapted to meet the needs of school leaders in different school contexts (Hallinger, 2018). Based on Hallinger's assertion that context is relevant to understanding instructional leadership behaviours, it was necessary to include open-ended questions in this study as a way of illuminating reasons for exhibiting certain instructional leadership practices.

The PIMRS consists of specific job functions, all of which relate closely to the instructional leadership roles and responsibilities. Each item in the instrument has a stem, which reads, "To what extent do you…" The respondents indicate the extent to which their principal

demonstrated specific leadership behaviours by selecting one of the following responses with a corresponding point value: Almost Never, 1; Seldom, 2; Sometimes, 3; Frequently, 4; and Almost Always, 5. The three major categories of the principal's responsibilities are: Defining the School Mission, Managing the Instructional Programme, and Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate. For each item, the respondent rates the frequency with which the principal enacts instructional leadership behaviour. The instrument was scored by calculating the means and standard deviations for the items that comprise of the 10 subscales. The teachers were also asked to give a brief explanation corresponding to their rating for each item. The explanation helped to delve deeper into teachers' perceptions of their principal's instructional leadership role.

The ethical approach to this study was established by following Merriam's (2009) procedures and guidelines for research. Consent was sought from the Ministry of Education and later from the respondents about their willingness to participate in the study. Of note is that all the teachers (N=24) of the rural secondary school agreed to participate in the study and the return rate of the completed questionnaire was 100 per cent. Fifteen of them were females and nine were males, and most of them were above 30 years of age. Most of these teachers had a bachelor's degree and had more than 10 years of teaching experience. All of them were classroom teachers and did not hold any administrative position in the school. The principal of the school had a bachelor's degree and has been teaching for over 20 years, four of which were as the principal of the current school.

As part of the study's research ethics, the teachers were informed about the aim of the study and how the findings could help the stakeholders, especially the Ministry of Education as the principal stakeholder. Also, the teachers were informed that they could withdraw from participating in the study at any time. Confidentiality of the details of the participants was ensured based on Creswell's (2013) suggestions. The lead researcher distributed the questionnaire and gave teachers time to complete the questionnaire after critically reflecting on the instructional leadership behaviours of their principal.

The analysis of the quantitative data used the common measures of central tendency – statistical mean and standard deviation (Muijs, 2011). In this case, the statements that had means of below 3.0 were categorised as exhibiting a lower level of instructional leadership traits and those above the mean of 3.0 were rated as demonstrating a higher level of instructional leadership practices. A thematic approach was utilised for the qualitative data analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Some relevant quotations from the qualitative data are presented to provide further insights into teachers' views on their ratings. This is done on the advice of Ruddock (1993) with reference to qualitative data: "some statements carry a rich density of meaning in a few words" (p. 19).

Study Findings

The study findings are presented in two parts: the first covers the analysis of the quantitative data, and the second deals with the analysis of the qualitative data.

Quantitative Data

As indicated earlier, the study addresses the degree to which teachers in a rural Fijian secondary school perceive their school principal as engaging in Hallinger's instructional

leadership behaviours. Based on the analysis of the quantitative data (Tab. 1), the principal moderately demonstrated instructional leadership practices. Within the specific subscales, the two that teachers rated as frequently demonstrated by the principal (as indicated by the high mean scores) were: communicating school goals and protecting instructional time. The remaining subscales associated with the instructional leadership role yielded means of less than 3. Overall, this result shows that teachers perceived that their school principal did not engage much in the leadership behaviours as outlined in Hallinger's instructional leadership model.

Major Category	Subscale	Mean (on 5-point scale)	Standard Deviation
Defining School Mission	Framing school goals	2.7	0.27
	Communicating school goals	3.7	0.44
Managing the Instructional Programme	Monitoring student progress	2.8	0.33
	Supervising and evaluating the instructional programme	2.7	0.36
	Coordinating the curriculum	2.6	0.44
Developing a Positive School Learning Climate	Protecting instructional time	3.5	0.22
	Maintaining high visibility	2.6	0.29
	Providing incentives for teachers	2.0	0.45
	Promoting professional development	2.5	0.34
	Providing incentives for learners	2.0	0.24

Table 1: Teachers' ratings on instructional leadership practices (N=24)

Qualitative Data

As stated earlier, the qualitative data consisted of teachers' explanations of their rating of each item.

Defining School Mission

With respect to framing school vision, the two subscales are: framing school goals and communicating school goals. Most teachers (92%: 22/24) conceded that the principal does not formulate school goals. Examples of typical responses are: "*The Ministry wants all schools including our school to produce 100 % pass rate", "The circular from the Ministry shows what our goals should be 100% pass".* In terms of communicating school goals, most of the teachers conceded that the principal emphasises the school goals to the students whenever there is a school assembly. For example, a typical comment was: *"School assembly is the occasion when the principal announces and stresses the need for 100% pass".*

Managing the Instructional Programme

The three main subscales for this dimension are: supervising and evaluating the curriculum, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. With reference to supervising and evaluating the curriculum, most of the teachers (87 %: 21/24) felt that the principal relied on other senior staff in the administrative team such as heads of department and the vice-principal. A similar trend was evident for coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress. The following are some of the typical comments provided for these subscales respectively: "*All curriculum materials come from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry expects the head of departments to supervise the implementation of the curriculum*", "*Most of the work relating to coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student progress is done by the teachers themselves and we do not see the principal engaging too much in this*", "*Sometimes he asks the teachers about student progress in the staff meetings*".

Developing a Positive School Learning Climate

With regards to this dimension, the subscales are: protecting instructional time, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives to teachers, promoting professional development, and providing incentives for learning. Protecting instructional time received a higher rating from the teachers. A typical explanation for the ratings was: "*Because the Ministry wants 100% pass rate, the principal ensures that children are in the classroom studying*". In terms of maintaining high visibility, most of the teachers (92%: 22/24) reported that the principal spends more time in the office and in his classroom because he is also required to teach. An example of a typical comment is: "*Some days he is not seen on the corridor because he may be busy with administrative work or teaching*". With respect to providing incentives to teachers, all of them indicated that no incentives were in place for them. A representative statement is: "*In this school there is hardly any incentive for us teachers may because of Ministry policy*". On the issue of promoting professional development, most teachers (85%: 20/24) indicated they attended those sessions mandated by the Ministry but there was nothing much for them at the school level. A typical comment is: "*There is no school based professional development may be because of time constraint*". With regards to incentives for learning, most of the teachers (87%: 21/24) (identified the normal end-of-year prize giving ceremony organised by the school for exemplary performance but indicated nothing else was available to incentivise learning. A typical statement from teachers is: "*Nothing much, only the prize giving ceremony at the end of the academic year*".

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which instructional leadership practices were demonstrated by the principal of a rural secondary school in Fiji. Because this is a pioneering study, it sought the perceptions of teachers on the instructional leadership practices of their school principal, which were considered important and relevant for the purpose of the study. The analyses of both qualitative and quantitative data illustrate that the principal underperformed in most areas of instructional leadership. With two exceptions, the subscales received a rating of less than 3 (Tab. 1). The exceptions were communicating the

school goals and protecting instructional time, for which teachers considered the principal displayed good practices. A similar study conducted in Southern Illinois found that school leaders devoted more attention to protecting instructional time (Van Tuyle, 2018).

The low means returned for providing incentives for teachers, promoting professional development and maintaining high visibility (Tab. 1) indicate that teachers perceive lower engagement of principals in these areas. The qualitative data confirm this perception. This low level of engagement among school principal and teachers in providing a professional learning climate concurs with the findings of the Kaparou and Bush (2015) study showing principals had limited knowledge in these areas.

The importance of school principals' commitment to teacher professional learning and growth is supported by Dinham (2013) and Robinson et al. (2009), who assert that improvement in instructional practice and student learning cannot be achieved if there is no focus on promoting teacher professional development. Similarly, Lingam (2019) notes, "Continuous professional growth of teachers is positively related to student achievement, so providing opportunities for professional learning where staff can learn together will increase student performance and ultimately lead to school improvement" (p. 1). Promoting professional development in the school for teachers is essential in light of the various reforms in the Fijian education system (Lingam, 2019). Without the concerted effort of the principal in promoting professional development, these rural teachers may remain stagnant in terms of their professional knowledge and skills relating to innovative ways of enhancing learning and teaching.

Likewise, incentives for teachers are essential to motivate them to perform better in future. Without incentives to enhance their performance, they are unlikely to continue demonstrating high levels of performance. Principal visibility is also important; for example, walk-throughs could help both the teachers and students remain focused in their academic work. In this study, however, the rating was low on this subscale (Tab. 1).

Overall the findings therefore illustrate that the rural school principal did apply the leadership practices as spelled out in Hallinger's model but not frequently. Since the model illustrates effective instructional leadership practices to enhance student academic achievement, the findings of this study are of concern to all who have a vested interest in schooling in rural settings.

A contributing factor to the rural school principal's modest demonstration of most of the dimensions of instructional leadership practices (Tab. 1) could be a lack of knowledge and skills in various instructional leadership issues due to the limited opportunities for professional training in educational leadership and management (Duncan et al., 2011; Hayes & Irby, 2020; Lingam & Lingam, 2014). More recently, the Ministry has recognised that leadership in schools really matters and, as a result, it is seeking funding support from donor agencies to provide some training to school leaders (Fiji Ministry of Education, 2018). The generally low mean (Tab. 1) suggests that more attention should be paid to developing principals' knowledge and skills in relation to all major dimensions of instructional leadership to ensure their schools have greater success in terms of students' academic achievement. This resonates with the findings of the Jordanian study about the school principals' limited knowledge and experience in instructional leadership as well as in other dimensions of leadership (Abu-Tineh et al., 2009).

Another factor contributing to the results could be the dual role of the principal, as indicated in the qualitative responses of the teachers. Given the principal was also expected to teach, he may not have had enough time every day to devote to the core business of learning and teaching. The position of principal has its own specific outcomes and infinite responsibilities

(Crum et al., 2009), as does the role of a classroom teacher. Principals are expected to carry out the same administrative roles and responsibilities in any school whatever its size, although size may affect the magnitude of that work. Combining administrative positions with teaching positions in Fiji appears to be one of the ways used to meet budgetary constraints and also address teacher shortages (Lingam, 2012). In relation to this practice, the principal stakeholder needs to consider the future of the students as they deserve much more attention and priority. The dual role of the incumbent may have negatively impacted on instructional leadership practices. For one person to fulfil both teaching and administrative responsibilities is not any easy undertaking in contemporary times when expectations have evolved and increased considerably in all educational contexts, including Fiji (Cardno & Howse, 2005; Crum et al., 2009; Timperley, 2006). Both administrative and teaching roles have specific, different outcomes. The findings of the present study point to the need for the principal stakeholder to look into workload issues for rural school principals.

Despite the importance accorded to communicating school goals and protecting instructional time (Tab. 1), these traits of instructional leadership on their own may not be enough to make things happen in schools. School principals must consistently exhibit performance at an optimum level on all dimensions of effective instructional leadership to make a significant difference in students' academic success. In addition, with the manifold changes occurring in education, the Ministry should give priority to the nature of school leaders' work, especially among those leaders serving in rural settings. Provision of high-quality professional support to rural principals is vital to ensure they become more capable and competent in their leadership roles. Such initiatives could then lead to better academic achievement of the students attending rural schools. Otherwise, improvement in rural education will remain a chimera in small island developing states such as Fiji.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study have implications for school leadership practice in rural contexts. At a practical level, practitioners including principals need to take an active approach in practising effective instructional leadership role. They need to critically reflect on their own leadership practices and also consider feedback from their teachers in the school to improve leadership practices (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017). In terms of policy-making, findings of the present study could help inform policy makers and stakeholders such as the Ministry of Education and teacher educators about leadership preparation and development of principals in rural schools. At the moment the Ministry personnel face difficulties in providing support to rural teachers and they rely on principals to guide them in their day-to-day professional work. Given Hallinger's instructional leadership model is of relevance to Fiji, it would be professionally sound to emphasise such a model and to give it attention in all future leadership and management training programmes. Having better knowledge and skills in instructional leadership practices will certainly help school principals to improve learning and teaching.

The relevance of culture and context also has implications for leadership practices. Even though this study did not focus on this aspect, literature suggests that the socio-cultural context of the school shapes leadership practices (Hallinger, 2018; Hallinger & Liu, 2012; Walker & Hallinger, 2015). Therefore, future research using Hallinger's model could explore the correlation between socio-cultural factors and leadership practices of principals in rural schools.

In addition, a follow-up study could explore principals' views of their instructional leadership practices and the challenges they face in their professional work. Embarking on such studies would yield useful information about the potential, or lack thereof, to transform leadership practices.

Even though the views of the principal and significant others, such as Ministry of Education officials, were not included in the study, the valid and reliable instrument used to gather the data from the teachers provides some degree of robustness. The findings demonstrate that teachers who participated in the study were unanimous in their perception that their school principal underperformed in most of the instructional leadership traits except communicating the school goals and protecting instructional time. Thus the school principal needs to improve in all the three major dimensions of instructional leadership practices: defining the school mission, managing the instructional programme and promoting a positive school learning climate. While these are important responsibilities of all instructional leaders, competence in each one is critical to enhancing student learning outcomes (Lingam & Lingam, 2016). In addition, having such competence would help them to respond better to the demands of educational reforms, learning and teaching, and children's academic success. Conversely, such a gap in instructional leadership practices is likely to adversely impact school effectiveness and improvement (Hallinger, 2018; Robinson et al., 2009).

The evidence from this study provides a snapshot of instructional leadership practices in a rural school context. Undoubtedly, more empirical work is necessary to influence policy and practice. Yet, although this is a small-scale study based on the voices of teachers in one rural secondary school, comparable countries (other small island developing states in the Pacific region and beyond) may find this study of instructional leadership practices valuable.

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